# MUTINY ON THE VAKA?

**Almost 30 years ago, the Mangaian vaka "Rangimatoru A'ua'u" set sail for Rarotonga with no electronic or navigational aids, no captain and no escort vessel. The vaka was missing for a day and night and concern for the crew's safety sparked an air and sea search. Here the vaka's navigator, the late Maara Peraua, and crew member Maire Kareroa record their memories of the voyage, while extracts from Rod Dixon's 1992 diary describe events back on the ground in Mangaia.**

On September 17, 1992 a meeting of navigators of vaka attending the 6th Pacific Arts Festival took place at Opoa, near the marae of Taputapuatea, Ra'iatea. There were four navigators from Hawai'i, seven from the Cook Islands, including the Mangaian navigator Maara Peraua, and one from New Zealand. The leader was Nainoa Thompson from the Hawai'ian vaka Hokule'a and Mau Piailug, the Micronesian master navigator. The navigators discussed their individual sailing plans for the festival, then set sail on board Hokule'a for Mauke and Aitutaki. From there, Hokule'a crew members set out for each of the southern Cook islands to meet and train their vaka crews.

***Maire Kareroa*** **-** In September, 1992, Mangaia was visited by Chad Baybayan, navigator of the Hokule'a and another crew member. They taught us sailing techniques, in particular tacking into the wind, steering, balancing the vaka and positioning crew members in different weather and shifting the mainsail and jib. This was a one-day workshop to be followed by practical sailing. But on the first sailing day, there was no wind so we postponed the practical sessions until the weekend. Over six hours on Saturday we practiced tacking, using the rudder, and staying with the wind as well as sailing into it. We sailed against the wind from

the harbor to the post office channel and then into the wind as far as Atuakoro. I was surprised how fast the vaka tacked into the wind. In fact we had to restrain it from going too fast. Nga Ataaere and I were asked to work the rudder and keep the vaka in the direction set by our navigator Maara Peraua.

The Hokule'a team returned to Rarotonga on Monday. Through the remainder of September, we continued with trials, learning more of the skills of sailing our new vaka.

In October, the cargo vessel *Marthalina* called at Mangaia en route from Ngaputoru. The organizers of the vaka festival told us to follow the boat to Rarotonga. There was a big kai kai and send off. Food and water had been loaded on the vaka, together with life jackets, harnesses, first aid kits, flares etc. But for some reason we didn't leave. We were told later that the CAO Pa Pokino and the captain Uria Mautairi had decided we should wait a few more days for the police escort boat Te Kukupa.

*Crew member Maire Kareroa.*

***Mangaia, Thursday 15 October, 1992***
[Dairy] Late this morning, the double-hulled canoe Rangimatoru A'ua'u left Mangaia for Rarotonga minus her captain and one of the crew. Those on board were Maara Peraua (navigator), Daniel Daniel, Teokotai Rima, Kirianu Atariki, Teritaiti Teritaiti, Ngamata Areaiiti, Ngatamaroa Tai Ataaere, Pautiare Moeara and Maire Kareroa.

The crew had been waiting several frustrating days for official permission to travel to the Vaka Pageant on Rarotonga.

The captain Uria Mautairi, who almost single-handedly built the vaka, had been instructed by officials in Rarotonga to await the arrival of the escort vessel, Te Kukupa, due tomorrow.

It's not yet clear if the vaka went out on a training run and was unable to put back, or whether the crew, tired of waiting, simply took off. Opinion in Oneroa this morning, favours the latter.

Tino Pekepo, the crew-member left behind, flew to Rarotonga this afternoon. He tells me he thinks Rangimatoru followed the coast as far as the airport to catch the prevailing wind. The barge operator Willie Tuara, says the canoe is capable of cruising at 6 knots. He gives the crew a day and night to reach Rarotonga depending on the weather. Currently the sea remains calm

Word is that all the crew have life jackets. A handheld walkie-talkie was supposed to accompany the vessel, but lies broken in the Government radio office. A radar reflector has been fitted to the mast. Stores on board include a carton of beef and a carton of tinned fish together with drinking water, cigarettes, etc.

**Maire Kareroa** – In fact, we'd forgotten cigarettes, so one of the crew Ngamata Areaiiti went back to the shop to buy some. He said it wouldn't take long. At the same time, the barge operator Willie Tuara was urging us to get going. As we slipped out of the channel, we saw Ngamata running back along the sea wall, with the cigarettes in a plastic bag. At the end of the wall he jumped but missed the vaka. His gumboots filled with water, dragging him under, while his arm held the Rothmans above the waves, like Excalibur. One of the boys put out a paddle and pulled him on board. Keeping the vaka close to the reef we headed east, hoping to pick up Tino, our missing crew-member. By the time we reached the airport, it was clear he hadn't spotted us, so we headed off to sea.

**Maara Peraua (navigator) –**We steered the vaka towards Ivirua and I plotted a route for Rarotonga. Sailing past Ivirua, we reached the Motuanea headland– then headed for Rarotonga following the route I'd marked out on the map.

At 4 p.m. the vaka began to pick up speed with a light breeze. We pulled up the veao [jib] to gain more speed. Around 6 p.m., we were almost 30 miles off Mangaia.

During the day, I used the sun for navigation, keeping it to the left side of the vaka. After sunset we navigated by ocean swells, the wind and the stars.

Around 9 p.m. it began to rain with a strong wind blowing. The waves got bigger and bigger. The vaka was now sailing at great speed. We let the veao down but it didn't slow her. At times, it seemed the mast was almost touching the waves. The crew asked me to lower the sails. At first I refused, but by 11 p.m., with the weather deteriorating, I had to agree.

**Maire Kareroa** – The waves and the wind were coming from all directions. It seemed to me the boat was out of control. To make things worse, a small leak had sprung in the hull. The squally weather continued through the night. It was too dark to see what waves were coming at us. That made it hard for Nga and I to steer. After some time Maara was able to get the

boat under control. During the night we thought we heard the Kukupa and sent up two emergency flares.

**Maara Peraua (navigator)** - By my reckoning, we were still close to the route set down on my map. The moon was ahead of us. For a while the vaka travelled southwards but when the sky cleared we could see Tekopio [Scorpio], and I corrected our course. Two stars close to the tail of Tekopio [the 'Stinger'] indicated we were still on course for Rarotonga.

*The Mangaian vaka Rangimatoru, carved and constructed by the late Uria Mautairi – (photo: Moana Doi; Archives Hokule'a)*

**Mangaia – Friday, 16 October, 1992**
[Diary] This morning the winds have risen slightly, but the sea remains calm to the horizon. I've been listening to the radio but there's no news of the vaka.

After the Friday morning market, a crowd gathers in the garden outside the government radio office, eating plates of food and listening to radio messages from Te Kukupa. News and opinion circulating around the garden include - "there are only 8 life jackets on the vaka but 9 crew"; "there is no radio contact. To make things worse, the crew attached only a small galvanized pipe to the mast as a 'radar reflector"; and "not to worry, the crew has tinned beef, tinned fish, water and cocoanuts – enough to last a week."

**Maara Perua (navigator) –** I was pleased with the direction I'd set for the vaka but I couldn't work out the speed we'd travelled overnight. At 7 a.m. I told the crew I thought we had 80 miles more to go. We had entered a 'zone of error' of some 20 miles with no sight of land in any direction. If we crossed it successfully we'd be safe. If we were out by just one degree, we'd miss Rarotonga by 100 miles.

**Mangaia, Friday 16 October, 1992**
[Diary] Te Kukupa arrived offshore but she didn't stay long. The Mayor spoke to the captain by radio, briefing him on the equipment carried by the vaka and the capabilities of the crew. The patrol boat returned to Rarotonga, arriving in the evening, with no sign of the vaka.

Air Rarotonga are reported to be engaged in the search, although the regular Mangaia flight arrives just a few minutes late.

Most people remain up-beat with jokes about "the Mutiny" circulating. By tomorrow morning, after a second night at sea, the mood may change.

**Maire Kareroa** – The boys were getting anxious and a bit angry. Some were complaining that we hadn't left Mangaia in the proper way, that they hadn't seen their families or said goodbye to their children. Some were beginning to lose hope of ever seeing home again. In the morning Maara asked us to look for signs of land reflected in the clouds. I asked him "If we miss Rarotonga what's the next land?" He told me Niue. I asked him if he could find our way back to Mangaia? He said yes, but we'd have to wait until nightfall and follow the stars.

**Maara Peraua (navigator)** - At around 1 p.m. we began to see seaweed, coconuts and driftwood floating around the vaka but the low cloud and rain meant it was impossible to see anything else.

**Maire Kareroa** - We heard a plane fly overhead so we threw orange dye into the water from our emergency kit. But it was too misty and overcast for anyone to see us.

**Mangaia, Friday evening 16 October, 1992**
[Diary] On tonight's 'Te Rongo Veka' (the TV news carried via radio to the outer islands), there is no mention of the missing vaka until a short Maori language segment at the end of the bulletin. Rarotonga is full of foreign press covering the visit of Prince Edward and the 6th Festival of Pacific Arts. News of the 'missing' vaka comes as a footnote to a report on the imminent safe arrival of all the other outer islands vaka. In a brief interview, the Prime Minister Sir Geoffrey Henry speaks of his confidence that all the canoes will arrive safely, using the English expression "no news is good news."

Tonight there is the usual Friday night dance at Mangaia Lodge. No one is monitoring the government radio, despite earlier urgent talk of a 'round-the-clock' watch. No prayer services or vigil for the 'missing' crew. After 36 hours there is no obvious sense of urgency. Nor, it seems, in the media. No-one wants to cast a shadow over the festival.

**Maara Peraua (navigator)** - Around 4 p.m. Friday afternoon, the weather cleared. Finally we could see land, 20 – 30 miles off. We hoisted our sails and headed straight for the eastern side of Rarotonga. At 8 p.m. we reached the motu at Muri, then travelled past Titikaveka as far as Raemaru.

**Maire Kareroa** – One of the boys had been to the Atiu-Tahiti games and thought we'd reached Tahiti. I asked one of the Boys Brigade crew-members to use his torch to signal S.O.S. which he did, but not in a very helpful way. I also suggested to Kirianu (Atariki) that he use his flippers and mask to jump into the water and take a rope to shore, but he wouldn't. One of the boys raised an orange plastic flag to indicate distress. A plane flew overhead. Someone said 'that was Air Tahiti'. When a small boat came out, we asked "What island is this?"

**Mangaia- 7.50 a.m. Saturday 17 October, 1992.**
[Diary] Cook Islands radio announces that the Mangaian vaka has been found off Arorangi and is under tow by Te Kukupa to Avatiu. This message is from Superintendent Goldie of

Maritime Surveillance Services. On Mangaia, the crew are no longer 'Mangaia neneva' but "Ocean warriors", sailing without escort boats, walkie talkies or navigational aids. A story goes around that, before they left, the crew sent the Prime Minister a telegram asking him to have beer and cars waiting for them at the wharf.

The Prime Minister was indeed at Avatiu wharf when Rangimatoru arrived, together with a squad of Police, who took Maara Peraua away for questioning. The mood in Rarotonga had been nervous and a little angry with the government threatening to charge the Vaka crew for their search expenses. In response, the crew had agreed to claim collective responsibility for any broken laws. Meanwhile, Ora Harry, the Air Raro Agent, argues in mitigation that it wasn't the crew that got lost, it was Te Kukupa.

That evening, the Mangaian crew join VIPs in the stands at the National Stadium for the official opening of the Festival of Pacific Arts. The theme of the PM's address is "Make your stand, have faith in yourself and do it."

Whether Rangimotoru's journey was an example of "having faith and doing it", or just an "accident" or a "very serious legal matter indeed" has still to be decided.

A few days later, the *Cook Islands News* reports "No Vaka Charges." According to Superintendent Goldie, "the police were satisfied that there had been no political motivation nor any arguments involved with the canoe's premature departure…. the crew had gone out for a final run and had found out they could not head back because of strong winds. As the elements were in their favour, they decided to keep going" (*Cook Islands News*, 24 October, 1992).

The co-ordinator of the vaka pageant Ota Joseph tells Te Rongo Veka that he supportes the crew 50/50. "50% in favour because they'd sailed in the manner of ancient navigators. 50% against because they'd broken the agreement all navigators had made to travel with adequate safety backup."

An overseas visitor observes, astutely, that the Mangaian crew had been "irritated by the pressure put on them by Rarotonga to do things in a way considered appropriate by Government……"

"The sailing" he wrote, "can represent a *failure* to observe regulations or a *refusal* to observe regulations….. The second is more possible and fun for everyone except the government (who would have to react to the challenge) and the crew (who would have to pay a large bill for the search procedures)."

In the end, there were no official recriminations. The voyage passed into Mangaian legend -

*Ritorito to tauariki*
*To tara – to ronga*
*E vaka tarai rakau*
*E vaka atuitui*
*E tauariki noou e noku*. (Ina Papatua, March 2006).

**Postscript** - The ta'unga of the vaka Rangimatoru, Uria Mautairi, pava of Veitatei, passed away on 23 January 2021 after a long illness. This story is dedicated to him

*The now legendary voyage of the Rangimatoru was featured in the 2020 constitution celebrations on Mangaia (photo: Taoi Nooroa).*